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Dancing Fire

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Dancing Fire

Helena Alfajora
2015 - 2016
Canterbury Fellowship

In order of appearance:

Imminent Lure: The Call
chalk pastel & acrylic on wood
24" x 24"

Lonely Awakening
crackle medium, acrylic, watercolor, gold leaf on wood
48" x 24"

Awe Ablaze
acrylic, chalk pastel, watercolor, spray paint on wood
36" x 48"

Crossing the Threshold
chalk pastel, watercolor, acrylic on wood
20" x 20"

Resurrection: In Our Midst
metal lathe and soil

At Peace
photoshop cc
10" x 16"

Perched upon the sill of a makeshift window, a goldfinch sang. Overwhelmed by its duty to fill, the goldfinch staggered a two-step to the left, and planted onto its belly, exhausted. There it laid and there it stayed, swallowed by the silence of the vacant room. The periwinkle glow of a sun not yet risen peered into the room, revealing a living space. Within the room, vines hung from the ceiling in sweeping motions, trunks aligned the walls’ edges, and totems, dried flowers, glasses, shells, leaves, seeds, sculptures, bowls, and ornaments, were strung upon the trunks as if in mid-use. Dusting over all it could, the sun’s early glow kindled the room.

Above, a gyrfalcon danced in the cloudless sky—spiraling, spinning, soaring—until deciding to swoop near the mountain’s base for prey. Circling, the white bird spotted a tiny creature and dove. Clasp ing the creature with its talons, the predator lifted the treat to its favorite morning spot atop The Volcano. Once there, the gyr perched itself on a ledge. Frantic flutters came from its claws, signaling the awakening of the goldfinch. And, just as the giant lost control of the small bird, the goldfinch bellowed its long-awaited morning song, and the sun emerged on the horizon. Golden chirps and rays radiated through the atmosphere, dancing in harmony. The gyr backed away from the goldfinch, bowed its head and spread its wings for flight. A brush of white painted the golden sky.

1

I finally get out of bed. I immediately feel the tiny dirt on the floor left behind from our dogs that are left in my room when everyone leaves the house. Just call my room the room-for-left-behind-dogs-clothes-blankets-and-other-junk.

The hardwood floor feels especially cool today, despite the recent warm temperatures. That is until I reach the coffee machine. My foot becomes instantly wet and warm, and I know before looking down that I just stepped in the pee of our almost-potty-trained-but-not dog.

Never a morning without a little stumble in our house. Dogs, younger siblings, older siblings, mom, dad. But the thing is, I’m really good at reading into signs. Little actions and incidents, especially during the morning, that either send my day off just fine, or catapult me into a stressed, sad, tired attitude that tastes like a bad omelette—rubbery, egg-shelly, and an ugly combination of ingredients.

It’s not just stepping into the pee, it’s the stack of dishes no one’s cleaned, the opened cabinets with its bags and treats scattered on the floor, the unfilled water containers. I would expect this if I lived in a house where all our last names are different. Though, in this household, everyone has matching last names, but me.

I groan. I left my travel mug in mom’s car. I leave the house without shoes, figuring my feet are dirty enough. I pass my car and notice an unlocked, passenger door. I mean, luckily no one took anything because the unlocked button was inviting all wandering eyes on the sidewalk. I open

the door to push the lock down, and I step back, satisfied. I continue completing my journey in finding the coffee mug when I notice that now my car alarm lights are going off.

I groan again. In all the huffing and puffing, I managed to lock myself out of the house. The bad omelette just burned.

“Why aren’t you wearing shoes?”

A voice from feet below interrupts my tragic monologue. I look down at my feet, aware that they had become home to some rocks who nudged themselves in.

I begin to respond, but the young child spoke again, “I don’t like to wear shoes. But my mom and dad always make me when I go outside. They say, ‘Luka, wear your shoes or else the gnomes will snatch your feet from the garden.’ Did you see any gnomes come after you?”

It was after he said his name that I remembered him. The only child of the Rivers family. They had no dogs.

Luka sat on his front porch stairs with his navy blue backpack and bright, red shoes. He seemed to be waiting for his mom or dad to take him to school.

I finally respond, “I’ll answer your question, Luka, if I get to ask you one first.”

Luka thought it over, making an exaggerated thinking face. “Ok!”

“What are you doing outside?” I ask, rolling my feet over the sidewalk stones.

“Waiting for school! I’m in the way when mom and dad get ready, so I wait here.”

I nod my head, looking at their two-story house. With household of 3 I couldn’t imagine space being an issue, especially when my house shelters 8.

“Hmm, to answer your questions, no, I haven’t seen any gnomes. Yet—I ought to be more careful when I leave the house ‘cause those gnomes are feisty and fast. I left my house without shoes because of things ... that aren’t important anymore,” I shrug, thinking about how heated I got over such small things.

“Did you know that gnomes leave the holes in the grass? And that they work for Pele?” Luka asks, while inspecting the grass on his yard. He points to an empty hole for me to look at from over the garden fence.

“There!” he exclaims. “Did you see it?” My eyes catch brown retreating into the hole. We held our breath. The creature popped back up twice before deciding to leave.

“She heard us talking about her,” his brown eyes widen. His hands cover his mouth. He looks up to the sky, and then back around the garden—looking for her.

“Can you remind me who Pele is?”

“You don’t know her?! I’m in the 1st grade, and I know her more than you?” Luka was beaming over his expertise, and wasn’t unwilling to share.

“Pele became a goddess when she was 7, like me. She has fire, red hair because she rules the fire and volcanoes. When she was 7 ...”

The skies were still blends of smoky grey and cobalt blue. Slivers of silver appeared at night and arrays of violet joined during the day. The treetops still met, tall and dense, like a second firmament. And the ocean that met the sand upon the shore only sent but tiny tremors. The treetops separated the view of the sky and the ocean kept separated from the shore and the thing that reached all was The Volcano.

But it had always been, for as long as Pele could remember, dark. And for as long as she could remember her brothers and sisters would tease her for being so easy to spot with her flaming, red hair.

Pele picked up one of the scattered spearheads on the floor. Her parents had ordered her to stay inside because it was getting darker out. So with the spearhead, she grabbed a chunk of hair and hacked at it. The pile of crimsons, oranges, burgundies, and gold on the floor grew and illuminated in a rich vibrancy. Once she deemed her haircut done, Pele quickly hid the spearhead and hair underneath a mat, and patted it down.

But the mat quivered. The strands shot out in flurries, aiming their spite at the young girl’s head. Pele shook and grabbed fists of air and hair around her. “No! Get down!” She exclaimed. The strands began, circling around her head, replacing her vision with a blur of angry reds. “I said no!” Her exclamation stunned the pieces. “Down,” she said lifting the mat again. Drudgingly the hair obeyed, and Pele dropped the mat on the pieces once they were under. She stomped on top of the mat in assurance and triumph then ran off.

Outside, the darkening sky her parents warned of had been pierced by streaks of burnt sienna and shocks of yellows. But Pele was preoccupied with her newfound freedom. She felt the air tingle her head in places she’d never been aware of before. The electrics flashed the sky, performing like they seldom had before. Her strides were faster without the weight of her mane to slow her. The lightning was hitting more rapidly, tap tap tapping onto the mountain in the sky. Pele knew her siblings would be at the watering place, and her excitement buzzed over her incognito appearance. The energy vibrated over the top of the mountain, desperate to find its way in, dancing across the ridges before—



KA-BOOM

Pele fell to the ground. She turned over onto her side, and realized, for the first time, just how alone she was. She searched the sky for an indicator of where she was. Smoke mugged her vision. If her parents and brothers and sisters felt the same ground shake, they would be worried about her, and if they went home to find her, she would not be there.

Lava bled through the cracks, streaming down the massive mountain. The smoke began to clear, but Pele could not move. Looking into the sky, she swore she saw her hair, spiteful and

glowing, grow down the volcano in strands, awakening the mountain.

As the volcano stretched its long-dormant body, and Pele began to fall into a deep, muted sleep.

Spring showers returned. The dogs were begging not to go out into the wet, pouring rain. I found myself telling them, “You both need to go out, or else the gnomes will think we’ve all gone down under. You guys are the boss at nipping at those little guys to mind their own business.”

They blink. Good talk.

I leave the house with the dogs trailing behind, and keep an eye out for any occupied gopher holes, but it seems the rain scared them all in. Whenever it rains, I always get the urge to go out and adventure, but then I think, man, the rain will cause such bad traffic and it’ll be so cold, and so I never end up doing anything.

The rain falls fairly light, but consistent, that trickster. The dogs and I pass people who underestimate the downpour, but I still greet them with a nod and smile if they look at me.

Then I see him, little Luka. Standing underneath a bus stop. The dogs restrain my pull, not want-

ing to walk anymore, but I try to send them mind urges, telling them this is important.

“Luka, what are you doing out here?!” I say, unable to cover my concern.

“Oh, hi. Don’t tell my parents, but I wanted to surprise them at home since it’s dad’s birthday. All the time, they forget I get out of school early on Tuesdays. But then it started raining.”

The little boy was dressed in a sweater, and the same red shoes from the other day except now, the red was damp and darkened.

“So your parents think you’re still at school?”

His gaze was still turned down and away. He nodded.

He stayed silent while I messaged my mom to call the Rivers family and tell them I was going to walk Luka home.

“Hey, come on, why don’t you open this umbrella and hold it. I brought it with me just in case.”

He kept his silence.

“Wanna hold, Buggy?”

He shook his head.

I held both leashes in my left, and put the other on his backpack, trying to assure him.

“Hey, know what this reminds me of? Pele when she ran from her home because she wanted to play with her siblings. Remember how her family didn’t make her feel bad about running away or for cutting her hair and instead embraced her?”

He spoke, soft and muttered, “Yeah, but then they treated her weird after because of her powers.”

“That’s what most people think, but I spent some time reading about her. They actually misunderstood her.”

He finally lifted his head up and out to the greys of the concrete and water in front of us. The clouds broke just enough for the sun to lay a ray on across his head as he asked, “What did she say?”

—

They prefer to evoke Pele in times of heated rage, throttling anger and fury in scarlets and mad maroons, calcifying colors at me. They curse me, demanding gifts of revenge. They give me their despair, sorrow, and hate—what am I to do when I am surrounded with all this?

What do I do when I know I am more than that—

After my family found me, I didn’t wake until the lightning retreated, returning the sky to a perpetual dark, midnight hue. They told me, Pele, you control the volcano. I felt like I grew years during that conversation. They decided it was best for me to stay up there on The Volcano. I was to talk to the gods, and learn how to control my powers.

That evening my father and my dearest sister, Hi’iaka, trekked with me to my new palace. My mother wasn’t strong enough to show her fear of me, her daughter. I read worry in Hi’iaka’s tremors. Her footsteps hitting the—my volcano—in shakes and mini quakes. She told me later how indeed during our climb up that mountain, I had grown older, surpassing her in age. I barely remember a time when I was the younger. Before we parted, she held on to me, tears descending her face. “I’ll come back to see you,” she promised, swearing her allegiance to me, and the land.

“Use your senses and open your body and mind to the spirits here,” my dad told me, knowing this day he had been preparing for was finally here. “Do not let the decisions you make be in the name of Hi’iaka and I ... you are related to more than who see you here.”

I still return to the spot where they left me. Out of my sister’s tears, my dad’s roots, and my mountain that spot became home to the ‘ōhi’a tree and its lehua flowers.

But I am trapped. And I lost my sense of human time. And the lehuas now run rampant on my land, and Hi’iaka has yet to visit. Has it been years or hours since they left?

The spirits tell me I need to clear my mind before they can teach me anything. But try doing that when your family has abandoned you. When in all your memories of them they are teasing you. When your irregularities have been confirmed.

Because now I am atop this mountain and I can feel all its energy, bubbling, moving, awakening. I can feel the terror people have towards me and my power. But most of all I can feel my own fear and trembling.

The slivers and cracks around me break open, hissing steam. I grit my teeth, trying to gain physical control back over my body. My thoughts rampant, despite my strain. The unfairness, the isolation, and the responsibility thrown onto my shoulders.

The floor tears open pulling me down. My fists slam the earth, yet lava still rises. The screams of the lehua are silenced.

A dance between self-loathe and nature's embrace. A song sung between the chorus in my head
and the ricochet of forces beneath the cracks.

I let go of myself. The explosion takes front stage.



“Yeah, I think that’ll work.”

I receive the leash back from Luka, and I watch him pass through the fence, unsure if I should walk him to the door, or wait. Luka presses his doorbell and steps back to put his backpack down. He retrieves the necklace for his dad, puts his backpack back on, and waits.

He doorbells again, turns, and raises the necklace, smiling.

The sun breaks through the clouds as the door opens.

A gopher peaks out from the lawn and looks at the sun.

We watch to assure Luka’s safe return home.

With hollow eyes Pele watched the explosions of fire around her. Her body unattached from her sense of touch. Through the wind, her mom’s voice rang clear. You are going to grow to have the most beautiful, powerful, and understanding soul. It was something her mom had reminded her time and time again.

It hit a chord this time though. She still had growing to do, lots of growing and some mending. Pele centered herself, reaching for each of her senses. She felt for the lehuas, laid to rest under her fit of fury. She felt for her family, frightened, not of her, but for her safety.

Something beckoned her to the sky. She recalled the dark coats of navy hidden behind the swirls of smoke and sizzles of steam. As her mind envisioned the old, a bright palette of roses, peaches, and bluebells pushed into her mind. Calling the smoke to her, Pele could feel herself pulling back layers. More voices came to her, and she directed their spirits in helping her uncover this vibrant array.

Mending herself, mended her volcano. Opening herself up to the earth, opened this imagined oasis. She could swear it was there. Using her shocks of yellows and blades of whites, she called on her land, her family, and her ancestors, and they brought light back to the sky.



I'm really good at reading for signs of her.
 I see her in the gophers, or gnomes, out in our lawns.
 I say hi to her when I'm out walking my dogs.
 I see her when the sun blazes, setting and rising,
 But also when darkness consumes the night sky.
 I feel her in those moments of anxiety and distress.
 And I channel her when I seek courage and power.
 Today is Luka's birthday. I bought him binoculars and a fiery, red hat.



A phoenix flies out of an explosion in the night, twirling upwards out of the fiery tornado. From the height of the sky, the phoenix is invigorated as if birthed anew. Eyes beady, beating to the excitement of the volcanic show, it zig zags across the molten and lehua strewn landscape before resting at its favorite spot atop The Volcano.

She is there, not at the center of it all, but centered by it all. The lands of her mountain extends outwards, crescently growing. No longer separating island and sea, an invitation between crater and water to expand the world's palette.

Diving, the phoenix passes the goddess who nods in its direction. It pecks at lehua minutes away from their ritual silencing; the crimson bird takes all into its beak. In this overlapping of lives on earth, the lehua and the phoenix evoke the reds of cycles, birth and death, harmony and balance, existence.

The red of love tickles the phoenix, fluttering its wings quicker. Flying lower, swooping down, the phoenix and lehua drop, descending wondrously. As the flames hit the ground, a small gold-finch lands on a goddess, awakening anew.

